

# Identifying their Farm's Weakness Became their Strength

**M**ost dairy farms today have at least one limiting factor holding them back from realizing their goals; whether it is labor, finances or land use, until the problem is fixed, the farm will not be able to realize its full potential.

For the Stakenas family of Freesoil, Mich., their limitation was Johne's Disease. They knew that until the Johne's was under control, completing their expansion process would be futile.

"We had to acknowledge the Johne's and get it under control," says Bill Stakenas, who with his father, Ed, and brother, Carl, and their wives, own Stakenas Farms. "We couldn't just pretend it wasn't there. Although we didn't have a lot of cases, it is the biggest issue we have and it had to be fixed before we could grow."

With the help of their veterinarian, the Stakenases launched a Johne's control program that included whole-herd testing and special management of the infected animals. The first step in the process was selecting one person to head-up the Johne's program on the farm. Steve Stakenas, the herdsman, was selected to run their program. Having one person in control helps keep their program running smoothly.

"We needed to have one person in charge of the program to have it done correctly," Bill says. "There are a lot of details that he has to follow through on and if too many of us are involved it would be confusing."



*Herdsman Steve Stakenas oversees the Johne's control program at Stakenas Farms.*

## Setting up the Program

In order to create a benchmark for the herd, the milking animals were tested in March using the AntelBio Milk ELISA test through NorthStar DHI services. The milk tests were sent in on a Tuesday. That Friday the veterinarian pulled blood samples on the dry cows so that by the end of the week they had a sample from all 195 cows in the herd.

Once they had the testing data, they could begin segregating the cows and developing a management plan. Keeping the Johne's positive cows and their milk and manure away from the youngstock was the primary goal. Cows testing positive have a green tag in their ear instead of the standard yellow identification tag. Daughters of the Johne's positive

animals are also identified with a different color tag, since there is a probability that they may also be infected, but not testing positive yet.

"With the different color tags, anybody can look at the animal and know she is a Johne's cow," says Steve Stakenas.

The Johne's positive cows will stay with the herd until dry-off. Before calving, when the cows go into a steam-up area, the Johne's cows stay in a separate location off the main farm. The Johne's cows will calve in this area, away from the other animals, especially the calves.

"Keeping calves away from the infected cows is critical since most cases of Johne's are contracted in the first six months of life," says Todd Byrem, technical specialist for AntelBio.

Female calves born from cows known to be Johne's positive are sold for non-dairy purposes. Bull calves are raised as steers on the farm.

Because the older cows are not at risk for contracting Johne's, the infected cows will go back into the milking string. However, they will not treat a Johne's-infected cow for other health problems.

"Basically, if she sneezes, we sell her," says Bill Stakenas.

## Continuing the Program

Identifying and removing the infected animals is important in providing the foundation for the control program. However, the Stakenases now have to stick with it to keep the disease under control.



*Bill Stakenas checks on the dry cows. The dry cows are housed at a location off the main farm until prefreshening. John's infected cows will freshen at this location.*

In addition to the separate calving area they have put in other control measures. They no longer feed leftover feed from the cows to the youngstock and all calves are fed milk replacer after the initial colostrum feeding.

They are also trying to control the flow of people coming in contact with the calves. They supply plastic boots at the door for people to wear. The employees are also asked to make sure their boots are clean before going into the calf barn.

"We want to control the spread of John's without losing a lot of numbers all at once," Steve says. "We have sold 20 head since March – and that has had quite an affect."

All animals sold because of John's are marked so they cannot be used for dairy purposes.

The Stakenases also plan to continue to use the Milk ELISA test through MMPA and their milk hauler. A working agreement between MMPA and AntelBio allows MMPA members to send in special milk samples for John's testing. Members who have been trained can pull the milk samples. Otherwise, an MMPA member representative can take the sample.

"All MMPA member representatives have been trained on John's testing and establishing control programs," says Gary

Trimner, director of Quality Control and Member Services. "They are available to help members establish testing programs."

"We are just beginning our next round of testing this fall,"

Steve says. "It is so easy to send the samples in with the hauler that we will keep using the milk test. It is better than calling the vet out to pull blood samples."

They will use blood and/or fecal samples on dry cows as a confirmation of the milk ELISA test.

"We want to grow our herd, but before we could we have to see what is holding us back, getting the John's under control helps us identify one of our weaknesses and correct it," Bill says.

## How do I send milk samples to MMPA for Milk ELISA testing?

1. Contact your MMPA Member Services Representative and tell them you want to perform John's testing.
2. Your Member Representative will come to your farm, provide you with special John's testing paperwork, review the sampling procedure and submission process with you.
3. Cow samples are taken in numerically labeled vials and placed in 12 x 18 plastic bags. Sample identification and producer information are written on the AntelBio form and card. A card is placed in each bag of samples.
4. Samples must be kept refrigerated or on ice until delivery at the MMPA Novi Lab.
5. Your Member Representative will help you determine the best way to send your samples to Novi – e.g. Hauler, Member Rep., etc.

## When will I receive my results?

Samples are delivered to AntelBio on Tuesday nights. AntelBio performs the test and reports the results to the producer per the producer's instructions.

Results are available 5 days after they were received at AntelBio.

## How much does John's testing cost?

John's testing costs \$6 per sample. Payment for testing is deducted from your MMPA milk check.